NEWS

EXCLUSIVE: Bishop Schneider says Vatican is betraying ‘Jesus Christ as the only Savior of mankind’

In exclusive interview, Bishop Athanasius Schneider discusses the gravity of the Vatican's controversial 'Abu Dhabi' statement.

Bishop Athanasius Schneider in Rome, April 7, 2018 Diane Montagna / LifeSiteNews

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ROME, August 26, 2019 (LifeSiteNews) — The Vatican's decision to implement a document affirming that the "diversity of religions" is "willed by God," without correcting this statement, is tantamount to "promoting the neglect of the first Commandment" and a "betrayal of the Gospel," Bishop Athanasius Schneider has said.

In an exclusive interview with LifeSiteNews, on a Vatican-backed iniative to promote the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," the auxiliary of Astana, Kazakhstan, said that "however noble such aims as 'human fraternity' and 'world peace' may be, they cannot be promoted at the cost of relativizing the truth of uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His Church."

The spread of this document in its uncorrected form will "paralyze the Church's mission *ad gentes*" and "suffocate her burning zeal to evangelize all men," Bishop Schneider said.

He added: "Attempts at peace are destined for failure if they are not proposed in the name of Jesus Christ."

A "Higher Committee"

Last week, the Vatican announced that a multi-faith "Higher Committee" had been established in the United Arab Emirates to implement the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," which Pope Francis signed on Feb. 4, 2019, in Abu Dhabi, together with Ahmad el-Tayeb, Grand Imam al-Azhar, during a three-day apostolic visit to the Arabian Peninsula.

Members of the seven member (Catholic and Muslim) commission include Pope Francis's personal secretary, Fr. Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, and the president of the Ponfical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Archbishop Miguel Angel Ayuso Giuxot.

In a statement on Monday, Aug. 26, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said that Pope Francis "encourages the efforts of the Committee to spread knowledge of the Document; he thanks the United Arab Emirates for the concrete commitment shown on behalf of human fraternity and he expresses the hope that similar initiatives can spring up throughout the world."

Controversial document

The Abu Dhabi document drew controversy for stating that a "pluralism and diversity" of religions is "willed by God."

The passage inciting controversy reads:

> Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. *The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings*. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept.

On March 1, 2019, during an *ad limina* visit of the bishops of Central Asia to Rome, Bishop Schneider, whose diocese is located in a predominantly Muslim nation, expressed concern about this formulation to Pope Francis. The Pope said that the phrase in question on the "diversity of religions" meant "the permissive will of God," and he gave explicit permission to Bishop Schneider and the other bishops present to quote his words.

Bishop Schneider in turn asked the Pope to clarify the statement in an official manner.

Pope Francis appeared to offer an informal clarification at his Wednesday general audience on April 3, 2019, but no official clarification or correction to the text has been given to date.

In this exclusive interview, Bishop Schneider reveals **new details** regarding his direct exchange with the Holy Father at the March 1 meeting. He also discusses his views on the Pope's informal clarification at the April 3 general audience, and the **gravity** of a "Higher Committee" being established to implement the Abu Dhabi document, in the absence of an official correction of the controversial passage.

According to Bishop Schneider, in implementing the Abu Dhabi document without correcting its erroneous affirmation on the diversity of religions, "men in the Church not only betray Jesus Christ as the only Savior of mankind and the necessity of His Church for eternal salvation, but also commit a great injustice and sin against love of neighbor."

Here is our full interview with Bishop Athanasius Schneider.

Your Excellency, was Pope Francis's clarification of the Abu Dhabi document at the April 3, 2019 Wednesday general audience sufficient in your view? And what are your thoughts on his remarks?

At the Wednesday general audience on April 3, 2019, Pope Francis spoke these words: "Why does God allow many religions? God wanted to allow this: Scholastic theologians used to refer to God's *voluntas permissiva* [permissive will]. He wanted to allow this reality: there are many religions."

The Pope unfortunately did not make any reference to the objectively erroneous phrase from the Abu Dhabi document which says: "*The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in his wisdom*." This phrase is in itself erroneous and contradicts Divine Revelation, since God has revealed to us that He does not want diverse religions, but only the one religion, which He commanded in the First Commandment of the Decalogue: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Ex 20:2-5). Our Lord Jesus Christ confirmed the perennial validity of this commandment saying: "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Mt 4:10). The words "Lord" and "God," expressed in the first Commandment, mean the Most Holy Trinity, Who is the one Lord and the one God. Hence, what God positively wills is that all men should worship and adore only God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one Lord and God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Since they express man's fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, grave obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them" (n. 2072).

The aforementioned remarks of Pope Francis at the April 3, 2019 Wednesday general audience are a small step towards a clarification of the erroneous phrase found in the Abu Dhabi document. Nevertheless, they remain insufficient because they do not refer directly to the document, and because the average Catholic and almost all non-Catholics neither know nor understand the meaning of the theologically technical expression "permissive will of God."

From a pastoral point of view, it is highly irresponsible to leave the faithful of the entire Church in uncertainty in such a vital question as the validity of the first Commandment of the Decalogue and the divine obligation of all men to believe and worship, with their free will, Jesus Christ as the only Savior of mankind. When God commanded all men "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Mt 17:5) and when, consequently, in His judgment He will "inflict vengeance on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess 1:8), how can He at the same time positively will the diversity of religions? The revealed unambiguous words of God are irreconcilable with the phrase in the Abu Dhabi document. To affirm the contrary would mean to square a circle or adopt the mindset of Gnosticism or Hegelianism.

One cannot justify the theory that the diversity of religions is positively willed by God by adducing the truth of the deposit of faith regarding free will as a gift of God the Creator. God has granted man free will precisely so that he may worship God alone, Who is the Triune God. God has not given man free will in order to worship idols, or to deny or blaspheme His Incarnate Son Jesus Christ, Who said: "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (Jn 3:18).

After your exchange with Pope Francis on March 1, during the *ad limina* visit to Rome, did you have any further communication with him about your concerns? If so, was it before or after the April 3, 2019 Wednesday general audience?

During the audience on March 1, 2019, on the occasion of the *ad limina* visit, I addressed Pope Francis, in the presence of the bishops of our group, with these words:

> "Most Holy Father, in the presence of God I implore Your Holiness in the name of Jesus Christ who will judge us, to retract that statement of the interreligious document of Abu Dhabi, which relativizes the uniqueness of faith in Jesus Christ. Otherwise the Church in our day will not be straightforward about the truth of the Gospel, as the Apostle Paul told Peter in Antioch (see Gal 2:14)."

The Holy Father answered at once, saying that one must explain the phrase in the Abu Dhabi document regarding the diversity of religions in the sense of the "permissive will of God." To which I replied: "Since this phrase enumerates the objects of the wise will of God indiscriminately, putting them logically on the same level, the diversity of the male and female sexes must also be willed by God by His permissive will, which means that He tolerates this diversity, as He might tolerate the diversity of religions."

Pope Francis then admitted that the phrase could be misunderstood and said: "But you can tell people that the diversity of religions corresponds to the permissive will of God." To which I replied: "Holy Father, please (will you) tell the entire Church this." I left my verbal request with the Pope also in the written form.

Pope Francis kindly answered me with a letter dated March 5, 2019, in which he repeated his words from the audience of March 1, 2019. He said that one has to understand the phrase by applying the principle of the permissive will of God. He also noted that the Abu Dhabi document does not intend to equate the will of God in creating differences of color and sex with the differences of religions.

With a letter dated March 25, 2019, I answered Pope Francis's letter of March 5, 2019, thanking him for his kindness and asking him with fraternal frankness to publish, either personally or through a Dicastery of the Holy See, a note of clarification, repeating the substance of what he said in the audience on March 1, 2019 and in his letter of March 5, 2019. I added these words: "By publishing such words, Your Holiness will have the auspicious and blessed occasion in a difficult historic time of humanity and the Church to confess Christ, the Son of God."

I must also say that Pope Francis sent me a card, dated April 7, 2019. He enclosed a copy of his address at the April 3, 2019 Wednesday general audience and underlined the section regarding the permissive will of God. I am, of course, grateful to the Holy Father for this kind attention.

The Document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" has not been officially amended or corrected and yet a "Higher Committee" has been established to implement it. On Monday, August 26, 2019, the Holy See Press Office released a statement reporting that Pope Francis was pleased to learn of the formation of a "Higher Committee" for achieving the goals contained in document. According to the statement, Pope Francis said in its regard: "Although sadly evil, hatred and division often make news, there is a hidden sea of goodness that is growing and leads us to hope in dialogue, reciprocal knowledge and the possibility of building, together with the followers of other religions and all men and women of good will, a world of fraternity and peace." Your Excellency, how serious of a problem is this?

The problem is of the utmost seriousness, because under the rhetorically beautiful and intellectually seductive phrase "Human Fraternity," men in the Church today are in fact promoting the neglect of the first Commandment of the Decalogue and the betrayal of the core of the Gospel. However noble such aims as "human fraternity" and "world peace" may be, they cannot be promoted at the cost of relativizing the truth of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and of His Church and of undermining the first Commandment of the Decalogue.

The Abu Dhabi document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" and the "Higher Committee" tasked with implementing it are somewhat like a beautifully decorated cake that contains a harmful substance. Sooner or later, almost without noticing it, it will weaken the body's immune system.

The establishment of the aforementioned "Higher Committee" mandated with implementing at all levels, among other good aims, the allegedly divinely willed principle of the "diversity of religions," in fact paralyzes the Church's mission *ad gentes*. It suffocates her burning zeal to evangelize all men – of course with love and respect. It gives the impression that the Church today is saying: "I am ashamed of the Gospel,"; "I am ashamed to evangelize,"; "I am ashamed to bring the light of the Gospel to all who do not yet believe in Christ." This is the opposite of what St. Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles said. He instead declared: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" (Rom 1:16) and "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

The Abu Dhabi Document and the aims of the "Higher Committee" also considerably weaken one of the essential characteristics and tasks of the Church, i.e. to be missionary and to care primarily for the eternal salvation of men. It reduces the main aspirations of mankind to the temporal and immanent values of fraternity, peace and living together. Indeed, attempts at peace are destined for failure if they are not proposed in the name of Jesus Christ. This truth prophetically reminds us of Pope Pius XI, who said that the chief causes of the difficulties under which mankind is labouring "were due to the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics." Pius XI went on to say, "that as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations" (Encyclical *Quas Primas*, 1). The same Pope taught that Catholics "become great factors in bringing about world peace because they work for the restoration and spread of the Kingdom of Christ" (Encyclical *Ubi arcano*, 58).

A peace that is an inner-worldly and purely human reality will fail. For, according to Pius XI, "the peace of Christ is not nourished on the things of earth, but on those of heaven. Nor could it well be otherwise, since it is Jesus Christ Who has revealed to the world the existence of spiritual values and has obtained for them their due appreciation. He has said, 'For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?' (Mt 16:26) He also taught us a divine lesson of courage and constancy when He said, 'Fear you not them that kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him that can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Mt 10:28; Luke 12:14)" (Encyclical *Ubi arcano*, 36).

God created men for heaven. God created all men to know Jesus Christ, to have supernatural life in Him and to achieve eternal life. To lead all men to Jesus Christ and to eternal life is, therefore, the most important mission of the Church. The Second Vatican Council has provided us with an apt and beautiful explanation of this mission: "The missionary activity derives its reason from the will of God, 'who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, Himself a man, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself as a ransom for all' (1 Tim 2:45), 'neither is there salvation in any other' (Acts 4:12). Therefore, all must be converted to Him, made known by the Church's preaching, and all must be incorporated into Him by baptism and into the Church which is His body. For Christ Himself 'by stressing in express language the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5), at the same time confirmed the necessity of the Church, into which men enter by baptism, as by a door. Therefore, those men cannot be saved, who though aware that God, through Jesus Christ founded the Church as something necessary, still do not wish to enter into it, or to persevere in it.' (Cf. Decree "On Priestly Training," 4, 8, 9.) Therefore though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to find that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (1 Cor 9:16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the Gospel. And hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity" (*Ad Gentes*, 7).

I want to stress these last words: "The missionary activity of the Church today retains its necessity!"

Do you wish to add anything?

In his Wednesday general audience of April 3, 2019, Pope Francis also said the following regarding the diversity of religions: "There are many religions. Some are born from culture, but they always look to heaven; they look to God."

These words in some way contradict the following luminous and clear statement of Pope Paul VI: “Our Christian religion effectively establishes with God an authentic and living relationship which the other religions do not succeed in doing, even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven” (Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 52). How timely, too, are the words of Pope Leo XIII: “The view that all religions are alike is calculated to bring about the ruin of all forms of religion, and especially of the Catholic religion, which, as it is the only one that is true, cannot, without great injustice, be regarded as merely equal to other religions.” (Encyclical *Humanum genus*, 16).

Also fitting are the following words of Pope Paul VI:

> It is with joy and consolation that at the end of the great Assembly of 1974 we heard these illuminating words: “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.” It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection (Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14).

Therefore, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “the ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love” (n. 850).

In recognizing directly or indirectly the equality of all religions, through the spread and implementation of the Abu Dhabi document (dated February 4, 2019) without correcting its erroneous affirmation on the diversity of religions, men in the Church today not only betray Jesus Christ as the only Savior of mankind and the necessity of His Church for eternal salvation, but also commit a great injustice and sin against love of neighbor. In 1542, St. Francis Xavier wrote from the Indies to his spiritual father St. Ignatius of Loyola: “Many people in these places are not Christians simply because there is no one to make them such. Many times I get the desire to travel to the universities of Europe, especially Paris, and shout from wherever, like a madman, to impel those who have more knowledge than charity with these words: “Ay, how many souls, by your sloth, are denied heaven and end in hell!”

May these flaming words of the heavenly patron of missions and the first great Jesuit missionary touch the minds and hearts of all Catholics, and especially of the first Jesuit Pope, so that with evangelical and apostolic courage he might retract the erroneous statement on the diversity of religions contained in the Abu Dhabi document. By such an act he might well lose the friendship and esteem of the powerful of this world, but surely not the friendship and the esteem of Jesus Christ, in keeping with His words: “Everyone who shall confess me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32).

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+ Athanasius Schneider

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